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## The Politics of Arab Hip Hop: An Interview with The Narcicyst

Christine Quail

What do Canada, the Middle East, and hip hop all have in common? The Narcicyst, aka Narcy. A hip hop artist based in Montreal, Yassin Als Salman (Narcy) exemplifies an international movement in hip hop culture, and a blending of cultural perspectives coming from his life as an Iraqi youth in North America, using his experiences to create music for peace in the era of the Iraq War. After listening to his music on albums *Fear of an Arab Planet*, *Between Iraq and a Hard Place*, and the soundtrack to the documentary *Voices of Iraq*, and previewing some of his upcoming songs on his MySpace page, it is apparent that Narcy's music is about peace and war, hope and despair, death and rebirth—culturally and in terms of self-identity. Als Salman agreed to talk with me regarding his new album, the politics of hip hop, his place in the Arab hip hop movement, and the latest North American identity crisis.

The following interview was conducted on July 16, 2008.

CQ: So, you're working on a new album, *Illuminarcy*. What's the album about?

YA: What's my new album about? My new album's about the illuminarcy as a concept that there was a worldwide takeover with my music. And, it's really introducing people to the character of the Narcicyst being representative of what an MC is nowadays in the hip hop game. It's sort of like—I would say it's a criticism, more than a realization that I had as an artist, that a lot of the time hip hop is very self-centered; not the culture, but the artists themselves. You know, cats talking about themselves. So I wanted to really play on that character, the Narcysist, based on the Greek mythology character. So somebody who loves himself obsessively to the point of his own destruction. So the album is really about that character really taking over the world. So it could be about me, it could be about several MC's that are out right now that utilize their position but don't utilize it to its maximum capacity in a social setting. You know what I mean?

CQ: Yeah.

YA: So I'm really tackling issues of identity, of war, of self, of self-reliance, of over-confidence, of questioning oneself. All these issues that are jumbled in the experience of not knowing where you're from, to know where you're going. Is that clear enough?

CQ: Yeah, definitely. Is there any specific artist or group of artists that you're responding to?

YA: Uh, no, it's more of a ... Nas said hip hop is dead when he dropped his last album.

CQ: Right.

YA: And it really affected the state of the game. And people kind of stepped up their lyrical abilities and people saw it as an attack, so they decided to really project a more thorough image of what hip hop is about. And it helped, it definitely helped the movement. And this album is just about the continuation of being a hip hop enthusiast, somebody who grew up on hip hop, and allowing it to die. And allowing it to be reborn. I'm just trying to introduce people to who I am as an artist, and as an MC.

CQ: Ok.

YA: Being Iraqi, being North American, being that the world is in the state that it's in right now—all these things are things I wanted to introduce into the hip hop game, because hip hop is one culture that allows you to do so. You know?

CQ: Definitely. So, would you agree that hip hop is kind of diasporic at its roots—with how it came into being, then how it developed? How would you say Arab hip hop is a diasporic movement—or, is it?

YA: You know, the word “diaspora”—really, having studied political science, and communications at Concordia—the word diaspora was kind of forced down our throats. And I was like, I understand what it means and what it defines, but at the end of the day, the problem of Arab identity now in North America is number one, reforming itself, because it's under attack; and number two, forcing itself to be re-identified as something new because it's not in the same geographic location as it was, being in the Middle East. So, I say hip hop is definitely—I did my thesis on Arab identity in hip hop, and the one thing that I discovered was that all these guys that I knew that were using hip hop all over North America, who came from different parts of the Middle East, having different experiences, having spent time in the East and the West—we all ended up the same, kind of, with our mediation of our experience, if you will. So, hip hop is definitely one of the tools in North American society that came out of subjugation—of political and social subjugation.

tion—that African Americans went through in New York, and it is a great example of self-empowerment and self-actualization. So we take it definitely as an identity-formation thing, and it's most definitely helped us find the roots to a lot of problems that we were trying to solve in our lives.

CQ: So the phrase, “Arab hip hop”—what does that mean to you?

YA: [laughs] It's like, my life! It's like, I don't know. I mean Arab hip hop is what it is in the statement. Arab hip hop is something new, something that is expanding so quickly that people don't even know how to document it. I think it is the next level of identity crisis in North America. Whenever there is one culture that is under attack, it's definitely a positive source of contention to that attack.

CQ: That's funny, because I was just going to ask you how you would define your musical and/or activist identity?

YA: I can't identify it. That's the reason why I do it. There is no...it's something that we're all always looking for. I can't go back “home.” I mean, the closest thing to home is Montreal, but it's not home per se. I'm not, like, a Canadian—I mean, I'm a “naturalized Canadian,” as it says on my documents. So, I think that it's something that I can't define. Something that I can't put into words. That's why I keep writing about it, and keep coming up with new verses about it, you know?

CQ: Interesting. Is your work better received in Canada than in the U.S.?

YA: I think it's received just about the same. In the States, I know that the general population in the States is not happy with the way the States is going right now—economically, socially, politically, internationally. People don't really feel like their government represents them, or has represented them in the last decade. So, when I go do shows out there, I get nothing but love. And when I do shows out here, I get nothing but love. It's obviously a bit different in the sense of the separation from the negativity that's going on, but I wouldn't say I get better response anywhere. I get positive feedback everywhere that I go.

CQ: And you've traveled all over the world, right?

YA: Yeah, I've traveled—I wish all over the world—but to parts of the world that I've wanted to see, and there's much more that I want to see, definitely. I've done shows in Europe, I've done shows in the Middle East, I've done shows here.

CQ: So what's the difference, or how do you feel, is there a different vibe, doing a show for an audience in the Middle East versus North America or Europe?

YA: Well, I've done a couple of shows in Jordan in Dubai, so far, and it's different because the people in the Middle East are who I'm talking about, and who I'm talking to are people in the West. But it depends on the song—it could be inverted, and I could be talking about the people in the West to the people in the East. So

it's really brings out the similarities and differences in our experiences as Arabs, as Arab youth. It brings up a lot of conversation at the end of the show.

CQ: I read in one interview where you said the inspiration for much of your music is strong women, especially the women in your family. I think that you can see that, it's apparent in some of your songs very deliberately. But behind the scenes, how would you say that this has influenced you, your work, your life, your music?

YA: Well, my wife is an artist. She did all the artwork for our album. And my sister is a videographer, so she's directing my first music video. My wife's sister is a photographer for the *New York Times*, and she takes most of my photo shoots. So it's like it's all in the fam, kinda thing. I always feel like I'm surrounded by people who inspire me, and most of them happen to be women. And growing up, my mom would always drive me to school and play me music in the car. And my father would be the dude playing me music at home, when he'd get back from work. I learned a lot from both my parents, but my mom was definitely someone that taught me to use my emotions, if you will, and how to be true to myself in public. So definitely women—the sensitivity of the issues I talk about, and the importance of what goes on in the world, my positioning within that. I could get on track and be extremely chauvinistic, and talk about the shit that a regular dude would do, but I always take into heart my wife or my mother. If my mother came to my show and saw my show, how would she feel, you know? You know what I mean?

CQ: Yeah, definitely.

YA: I always take them as like the people that I'm talking to, and how I wouldn't want to disappoint them, or show a negative side of my people. My grandmother is somebody who is very wise in her age, and she knows a lot about what's going on in the Middle East, so she's somebody that I always sit down and talk to her about her past experiences that—she tells that stories that I put into my songs about Iraq and stuff like that, you know?

CQ: Do you consider yourself a feminist?

YA: [laughs] No, no, no. I don't, I mean, no, I don't think so, but I just believe in equality, and I believe in mankind, I believe that women and men each have their own perks and have their downs, and that in no way is one person more valuable to society than the other, you know? I don't think—wait, let me ask my sister.

[Calls out to his sister—"Do you think I'm a feminist?"]

I'm not a feminist, I'm a humanist. I asked my sister, and she said, "No, you're not a feminist in the active sense, you're more of a humanist." I believe that everyone is equal in that sense. I'd like to believe everyone is equal, in a perfect world.

CQ: Has the concept of space figured into your work?

YA: Well, my music kind of creates that space. It's something that is used to create that space for me to be able to talk about things that I wouldn't be able to talk about unless I was a politician, or be able to reach that level of hitting up 400 to 4000 people at a show, which is the way that I feel. So it creates that space, and it's definitely something I always talk about. I've never been home—where is home? What is home? Who is home? You know what I mean? So, space is a big question mark in my music, but it also is alleviated by my music. There's one thing that me and my friend talked about once, and we said that, hip hop became the landscape for us to walk through that we couldn't find going back to our native land, you know?

CQ: Speaking of landscape and native lands, your song “Sumeria”—what was the motivation for that song?

YA: That song was spur-of-the-moment. I was watching the news at my friend's house, and he found the sample, then he put the song together with the instrumental. And then I had actually written half of that to another song that was like three times the speed of it, hence why the words are really spaced out on the song. It's not like a lyric-dense song more than it is just a mood. “You left our waters dirty, cries of our daughters hurting,” so I took imagery of things from Iraq that I was seeing as stories that were being told to me by my family and then translated it...It's pretty straightforward, you know?

CQ: I do have a couple questions about some of the lyrics. When you say, “working for no promotion”—can you tell me who you're talking about?

YA: I'm talking about society in general. All beings in fear and loathing workin for no promotion no land and rising ocean, then the sweatshop in my clothing—so it's about the dichotomy of being on the “good” side of the world, if you will. On the side of the world where there is no war right now, and as positive as it is, it's negative; and as negative as it is, it's positive. Like, what I was trying to say with those is that we are to blame for, we profit off of, a lot of negative shit that goes on in the world outside of North America. We are surviving off of that, you know? Be it my Nikes being made in China, or the oil prices going up, and us complainin about some stupid shit like our oil costing us too much money when there's children dying for oil, you know? So these were the things that I was addressing. The working for no promotion is a feeling that I've had for a while. I'm a Master's degree student, I'm unable to find work that necessarily fulfills me mentally, or spiritually here, so it's just a list of things that I was noticing that were going on around me that I had no control over.

CQ: “The king, so shy and cunning”—who's the king here?

YA: It was about all leaders. It was a Middle Eastern leader, it was about Bush, it was about all these political pundits that “control our lives,” or act like they control our lives, or want to control our lives. So, it's about “the king so shy

and cunning, a song so high and numbing”—it could also be about myself. Talking about despite my inabilities to really transgress all the emotions of not being able to communicate how I feel to everybody in the world. I hope this song numbs you as much as it did me, and makes you realize the negativity that’s going on with our political leaders. So my music is always a reflection on number one—politics, and number two—music. It’s always, I feel like the cultures I’m in are always sort of at war, you know, being hip hop and being from Iraq—both my cultures are kind of at the forefront of a rebirth, or of a war, or of a destruction of some sort. So I’m speaking about both. But there wasn’t one particular person I was speaking about when I wrote that line.

CQ: At the end of the song, I wasn’t sure—maybe this is making more sense now that you’re talking about a “rebirth”—and the contradictions that you’ve been talking about...it sounds like it’s a song that has mostly a politics of hope behind it, and you’re saying, “I’ll catch you as I crumble,” and “I won’t let you fall,” but then the last line is, “I watched you fall, I watched you as you crumbled.” So, are you ending in despair, or are you ending in hope?

YA: I mean, I didn’t really...it was a feeling of despair on my back towards what was going on. I didn’t feel...I’m very anti-Sadaam, I believe that he was a main destructive factor. A lot of things that are going on right now in Iraq are because of him—the power vacuum and the destruction that he left behind. So, I was happy that finally, something was going to be done about him, but the way that it was handled was even worse. One of the main things I say on this album is, “same shit, different Sadaam.” You gave us nothing but the same destruction, just a different puppet. So, it definitely ends with a feeling of despair, but then after that, I sing, “my only love was a land called Sumeria, fighting a verse to a mic, hip hop still searchin for light.” So I’m still looking for that light that I can find somewhere...Without the down, there is no up.

CQ: So, what do you think the potentials are for hip hop politics?

YA: I think hip hop has a huge potential in politics. Our generation, a lot of our generation, grew up on hip hop, and a lot of them used it in a vocational, scholastic, different ways of using the culture to project a more positive image of self, or of the culture itself. I think hip hop goes hand in hand with politics. It is the politics of the street, the politics of self, it’s the politics of you and your homies, you and your girlfriend, you and the president. I think it has a huge potential. I was just thinking about this yesterday: Nas has a new track on his album, called “Black President.” I was like, fuck, how great would it be if Nas was to perform that track at the Democratic Convention. But at the end of the day, they would never invite a person like Nas to the Democratic Convention, because there are all these negative connotations to hip hop and the music that he makes. So, unfortunately, these are the barriers we have to break. But if you speak to someone like Chuck D, even

if you speak to someone like Nas, the elder people that do the music, you'll see how educated this culture is. But the media likes to shape it as a dumb, destructive culture. I think that it has huge potential in politics.

CQ: Is something like the Arab Summit, which organized hip hop artists and activists—does that have more potential as an organized group?

YA: The Arab Summit was just a one-off project that we did, and it was something people could take and create an Arab Summit 2. It sets the example of Arabs coming together to do a project about certain issues. We're hoping to do a part two right now with different people, certain core members remaining, with different people coming in, different visual artists, stuff like that.

CQ: Do you think that there's a way that academia and activism can work together with hip hop? Did you deal with that in your thesis?

YA: Academia is something that is more powerful than activism, because activism a lot of people turn a blind eye to, because they've boxed it in as, "oh my God, they're talking about the war again." But academia is something you can't contest—you put something down on paper, and it's there, it's real, it's defended, it's concrete, it has facts behind it. So, I think it's something way more powerful people can use to put an idea out there. If someone like Edward Said hadn't written *Orientalism*, a lot of the shit we think about right now, wouldn't have been thought of. So I think academia shapes activism more than people give it credit for.

CQ: You wrote your whole thesis about Arab hip hop—what do you think the most appealing idea or concept is, in the academic literature about hip hop; or who has "gotten it right," if you will?

YA: I don't know. I read a lot, I read everything. But, I don't think anybody got it right. I wasn't there during the inception of hip hop, so I can't really tell you who got it right and who got it wrong. But, a lot of it definitely helped me to formulate my ideas and put them together. Jeff Chang is somebody I always enjoy reading. Let's see, Murray Foreman. But I like to look outside the scope of hip hop, and more into identity issues and politics to shape my idea. Hip hop is the umbrella that holds it all together.

CQ: There's many different ways of conceptualizing media literacy—from critical analysis to media production, and involving different social issues. You've been involved in some media literacy projects: what do you think are the most underutilized methods or concepts in media literacy work that's being done?

YA: I think teaching kids to use different means of media is important, because not only do they learn it, but it forces them to critically analyze it more. And to not accept everything that they get on television as the truth, or that they find on the internet as the Bible. It helps them be analytical of the world around them, because



they start looking at the world through a scope—they start looking at the world through a camera, through sound, through anything. I think that's the most important part of media literacy—is to educate people on not accepting what people tell you without going to research it and knowing where it's coming from. I think that's the most important part of media literacy. I don't see it as causing a problem at all for anybody. It's a very positive thing that people need to learn, especially nowadays with your cell phones, and our gadgets have become our best friends, so we might as well use them for a positive cause.

CQ: Absolutely. Is there anything else you want to bring up that I didn't ask you?

YA: You know, you hit everything on the button. It's just, people need to understand that international hip hop is a legitimate force that is bringing the origins of hip hop back to the forefront, by projecting the artwork in the way that it was born. And that's not to say that it's any more righteous than any other form of hip hop, but that the American eye should be open to international hip hop as the next level of what the music is. It's all bigger than hip hop at the end of the day.

CQ: Thanks so much. I really appreciate that you took the time to talk with me.

YA: No problem!

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